Plato's *Republic*

Book I

My Two Main Points

1. Book I is a *prefiguration* of the rest of the text, as are its *interlocutors*: we move in stages from a *corrupt* to a *purified* class structure over the book's course (Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus*→ cf. the three classes of the *kallipolis* [VII]).
2. Another function of Book I is to show the *limitations* of Socratic *elenchus*: it's unable to deal with an internally consistent but still monstrous belief system, which is why the argumentative style changes from

Background: Sophists

- Professional, generally itinerant instructors of *rhetoric,* whose services were vital in a litigious direct democracy like **Athens**, where forensic skills were at a premium in court & assembly.
- Famous ones included Protagoras and Gorgias.
- They emphasized the distinction between *phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (convention), which *can* be a ground for *moral relativism*, leading either to radicalism (Thrasymachus) *or* to conservatism (Protagoras)—no clean ideological implications.
- Plato and his teacher, Socrates, vilified them for being more concerned with *victory* than *truth*.

Background: Plato's Socratic Dialogues

1. **TOOLS/TECHNIQUES**
   - ***a. Acceptance of conventional virtues…properly redefined:*** Socrates' ironic moral conservatism; *justice* in *Republic* or *courage* in *Laches*.
   - ***b. Elenchus:*** progressive questioning technique in which the subject is confronted with the existence of tensions/conflicts within belief system (*Apology* **24d-**); negative/deconstructive.
   - ***c. Craft analogy:*** virtues are like crafts, e.g., proper education of the young is compared to horse breeding (*Apology* 25b) and just rulership is compared to shepherding (*Republic* 345d).
   - ***d. Aporia:*** perplexity at the end of elenchic interrogation, when the subject is no longer clear about the meaning of the term in question (e.g., *Laches*, *Crito* 50a).
2. **DOCTRINES** *(Monument Valley metaphor—what's left standing)*
   - ***a. "Virtue is knowledge":*** implying that pursuit of evil can only be the result of ignorance, not *akrasia* (i.e., weakness of will); nobody does evil willingly (*Apology* 25e-26a; *Gorgias* 460).
   - ***b. Worse to commit an injustice than to suffer one:*** *Apology* (30d); also see *Republic* and *Gorgias*. ↓

Cephalus

- A seemingly honorable and just man, who has come to such a state not via philosophy but rather *experience*.
- His statements presage what is to come:
  1. the “very many mad masters” (329d) of desire, especially *sexual* desire (cf. 589a)
  2. moderation of *acquisitive* desire (330b-c; achieved by producer class in *kallipolis*)
  3. concerns regarding the afterlife (330e; Myth of Er {philosophy needed after all…})
  4. idea of just life as an *intrinsic* good, producing good order in the soul *as well as* happiness (e.g., 331a; whole point of *Republic*)
- The **first statement** of the meaning of justice (as *truth-telling* & *debt-paying*), which is a *partial* understanding appropriate to **producer class** (331b-c). Appropriately enough, Polemarchus “inherits” his argument (331e).

Polemarchus

- **Second statement** of the meaning of justice (as giving “benefits and harms to friends and enemies,” respectively [332d-e]). Appropriate for **guardian class** (a friend/enemy logic: 375e): this interpretation reinforced by Polemarchus’ claim that “making war and being an ally in battle” (332e) is the best way to help friends/harm enemies *and* by the later interpretation of justice as a kind of *guarding* (333d-334a).
- Socrates dislodges Polemarchus from this position by use of the craft analogy (*horsecraft:* harming horse will make it worse [335b-c]) and the imprecision of knowledge, arriving at the standard Socratic prohibition of harm (“never just to harm anyone” [335e]). They end with this redefinition of justice and promise to “do battle then as partners.”
- Interlude with Polemarchus is a *classic* Socratic dialogue: *elenchus*, *aporia* (334b-c), craft analogy,

Thrasymachus

- Instead of the **philosopher king**, we now get its *perversion:* a sophist. The Socratic technique founders here: he's made progress before due to the *inexperience* of his interlocutors, but Thrasymachus will have none of the old tricks and is never really beaten—he simply withdraws in contempt.
- Thrasymachus gives a **third statement** of the meaning of justice (as "the advantage of the stronger" [338c], i.e., it is purely conventional, controlled and defined by the ruling class for its benefit [338e-]—ideology in Marxist sense).
- Socrates then exploits the craft analogy (341c-), which had been introduced by Thrasymachus, to maintain that "it isn't fitting for an art to seek the advantage of anything else than that of which it is the art" (342b). Once Thrasymachus buys this, Socrates leads him deftly down the path to a

- Thrasymachus then *retracts* his earlier claim about the doctor (340d), by pointing out that craftsmen (such as shepherds) exercise their craft for *their* benefit, *not* the benefit of the craft's object (sheep). He goes on to argue for the benefit of (orthodox) injustice, especially tyranny.
- In response, Socrates initially tries to salvage his earlier claim about crafts by distinguishing between the art itself and the associated "wage-earner's art" (346b), but notice this problem: a wage-earner's art has as its purpose, *not* the betterment of its *object* ($), but rather the betterment of its *practitioner*—Socrates thus refutes his own claim about the fundamental nature of crafts. This sophistical sleight of hand allows him to reassert that the "true ruler" rules for the benefit of the ruled (347d-e).
- He then turns to Thrasymachus' claim about the benefits of (orthodox) injustice, making a long

More Thoughts on the Nature of Crafts

- Socratic reply: some crafts—***false*** crafts—**are** in fact focused on benefit to the practitioner of the craft rather than its object: medicine v. *quackery,* justice v. *sophistry,* etc. (See Plato's *Gorgias*.)
- New claim: all ***true*** crafts seek advantage of their *object*.
- Problem: **shepherding**. Even separating out the wage-earning aspect, does shepherding genuinely seek the advantage of *sheep*? What would that look like? Would it then be shepherding—or rather game-wardening?
- Thrasymachus: *ruling, like shepherding, is* ***necessarily*** *exploitative.* The ruling class *inevitably* exploits the ruled class; only the form of the exploitation varies (Spartans v. helots; rich v. poor; demagogues v. the demos; etc.)
- Justice as ideology: make the exploited believe that their exploiters benefit *them*—garlands laid

The Failure of Socratic *Elenchus*

- The best indication that Socrates' arguments against Thrasymachus are unsatisfactory is his own admission to this effect: "I have not had a fine banquet" and "now as a result of the discussion I know nothing" (354b-c).
- I suspect this is *not* another example of Socratic irony (cf. 337a). Thrasymachus, unlike Polemarchus, never acknowledges Socrates' victory (even as late as 350b). He simply acquiesces, recognizing Socrates' superior *rhetorical* skills. This is why Glaucon opens Book II by asking: "…*seem* to have persuaded us…?" (357a-b).
- The dialogue with Thrasymachus reveals a *limitation* in the Socratic *elenchus*: because it does not allow the full presentation of *alternative synoptic theories*, it can never transform the worldview of one's interlocutor—so long as it is *internally consistent*, *elenchus* can find no purchase.